

Data Ever After: Tackling Data Reference Questions at the Library

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Background & Methods

Background

Questions about locating hard-to-find data, including international data, historical and time series data, and microdata, are ever important and frequent at all types of institutions and libraries. Data reference is a growing area of expertise that is becoming a vital baseline skill for library professionals across subject areas, not just data librarians, as more teaching faculty adopt data as a regular component of assignments and as data librarians assist faculty and graduate students in locating secondary data for their research pursuits.

In order to learn more about the landscape of secondary data reference and how librarians can better support researchers and users in this area, data-focused librarians at the University of Minnesota developed a survey targeting library staff across different library settings and geographic locations that work with data-related questions. The survey focused on the types of data questions received and from whom, how librarians tackle these questions, roadblocks they experience, and opportunities for increasing expertise in this area of librarianship.

Methods

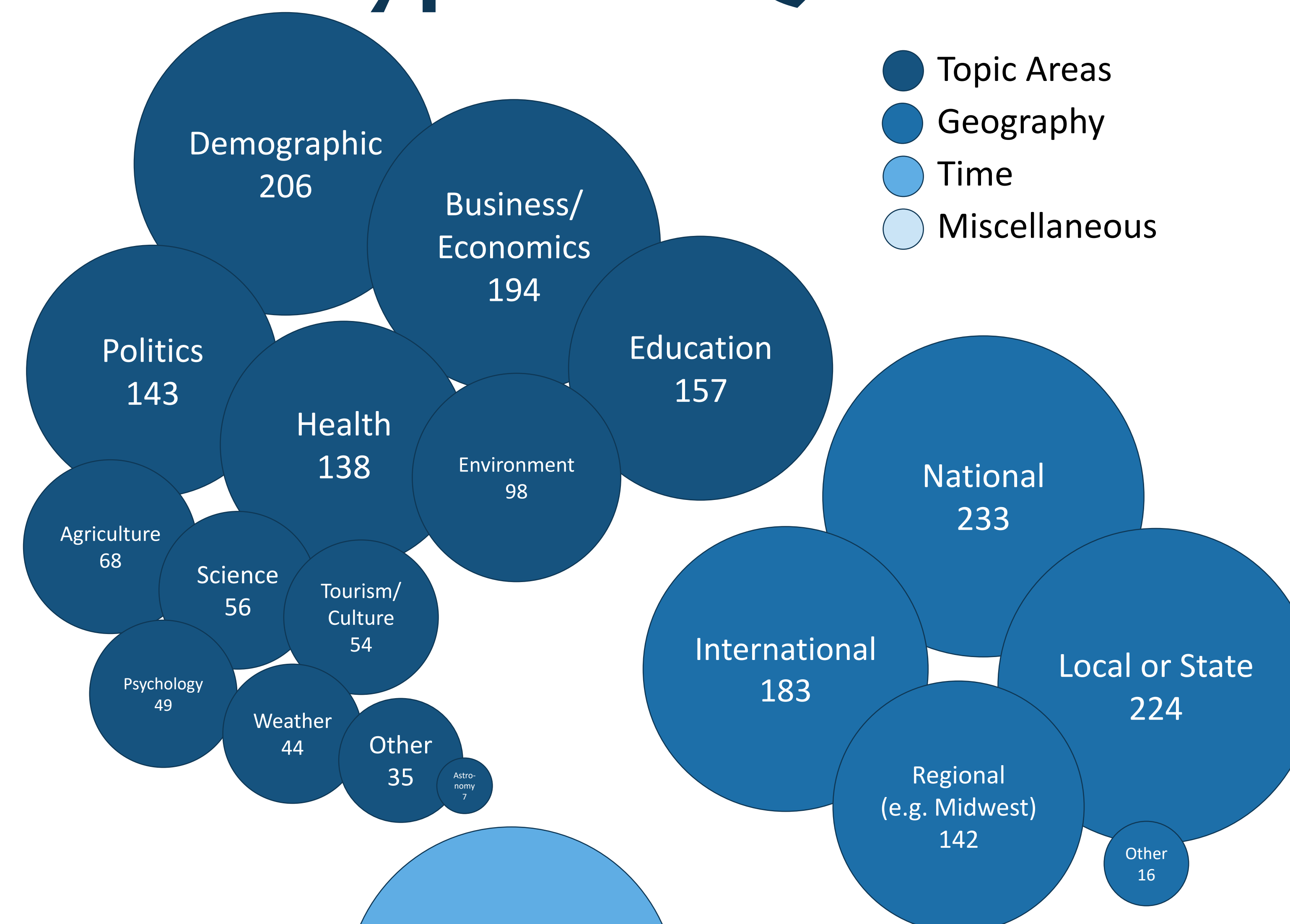
The survey was created with a focus on librarians who answer any secondary data questions in their work as the target audience. The survey was created in Qualtrics and received IRB approval through the University of Minnesota. The survey was sent to various national, international, and local listservs and mailing lists including:

- IASSIST (International Association for Social Science Information Services & Technology)
- GOVDOC (library professionals working with government information)
- RUSA (American Librarian Association (ALA)-Reference & User Services Association)
- RSS (ALA-Reference Services Section)
- BRASS (ALA-Business Reference and Services Section)
- NMRT (ALA-New Members Round Table)
- ULS (Association of College & Research Libraries University Libraries Section)
- Minnesota Library Association (MLA)
- MLA Public Library Division
- MLA Academic and Research Libraries Division
- Lib-minndocs (Federal Depository Library Coordinators in MN, MI, and SD)
- Research and Learning division at University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

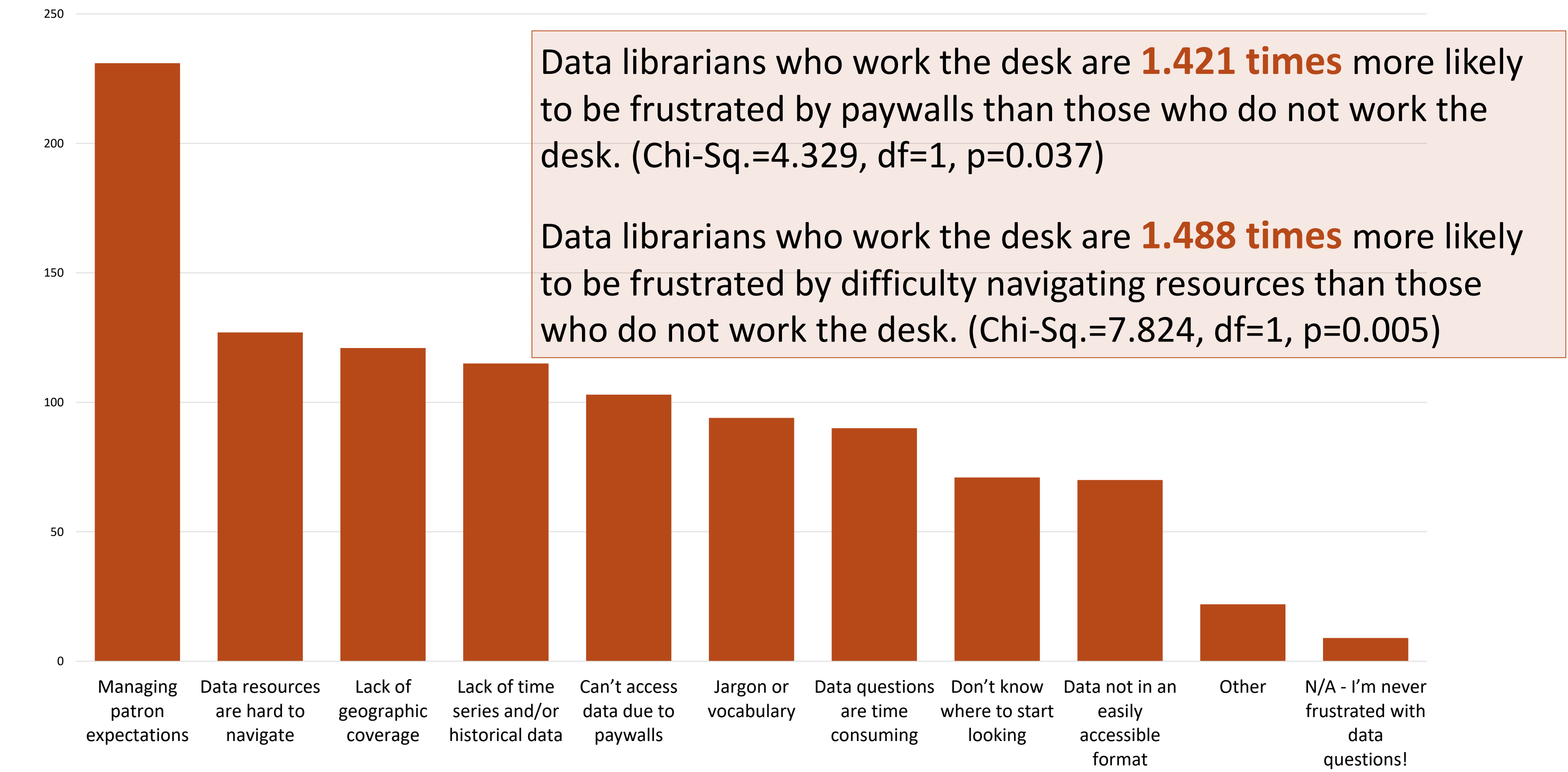
The survey was open from November 27, 2017 to December 22, 2017. Only responses where respondents indicated that they answered at least 1 data question on average per month were included in data analysis, which amounted to 278 total respondents.

The quantitative data was exported from Qualtrics into a CSV file. Data clean-up was done in Google Sheets and then the cleaned dataset was analyzed in SPSS.

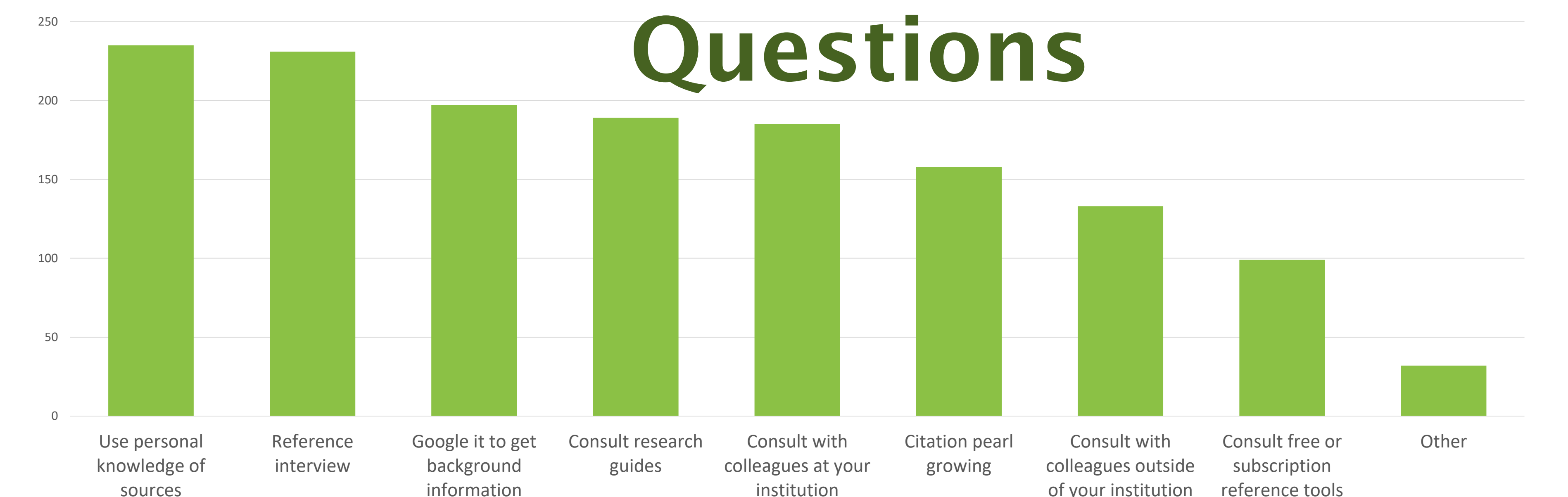
Types of Questions



Frustrations and Roadblocks



Strategies for Answering Questions



Suggestions from Data Librarians:

“Consult with or refer to **your institution's data experts!** Saves everyone time & frustration.”

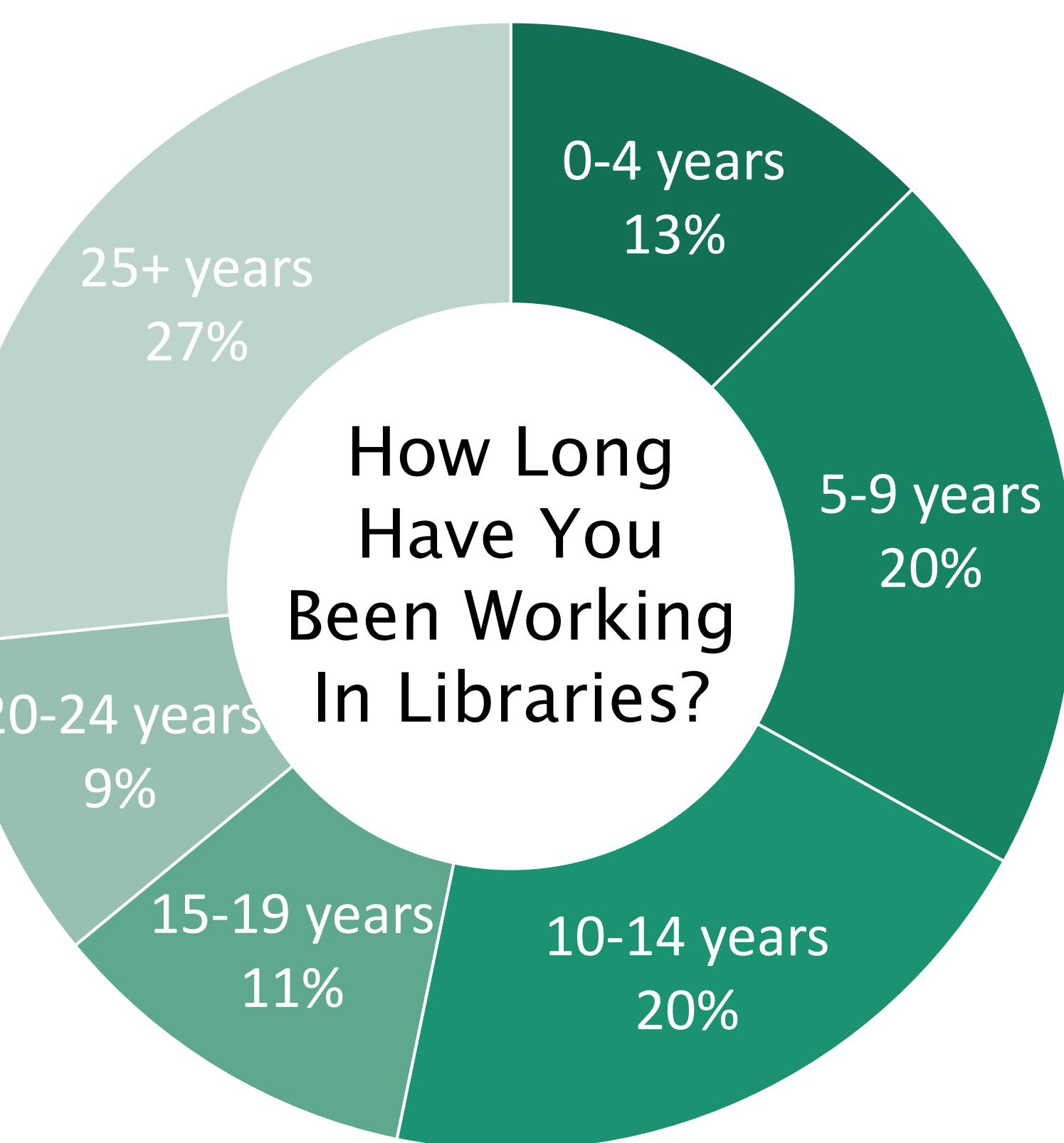
“It's often less about finding the data they want, and more about **helping them construct a research question** around what data already exists.”

“Keep a good set of **bookmarks**, and back them up!”

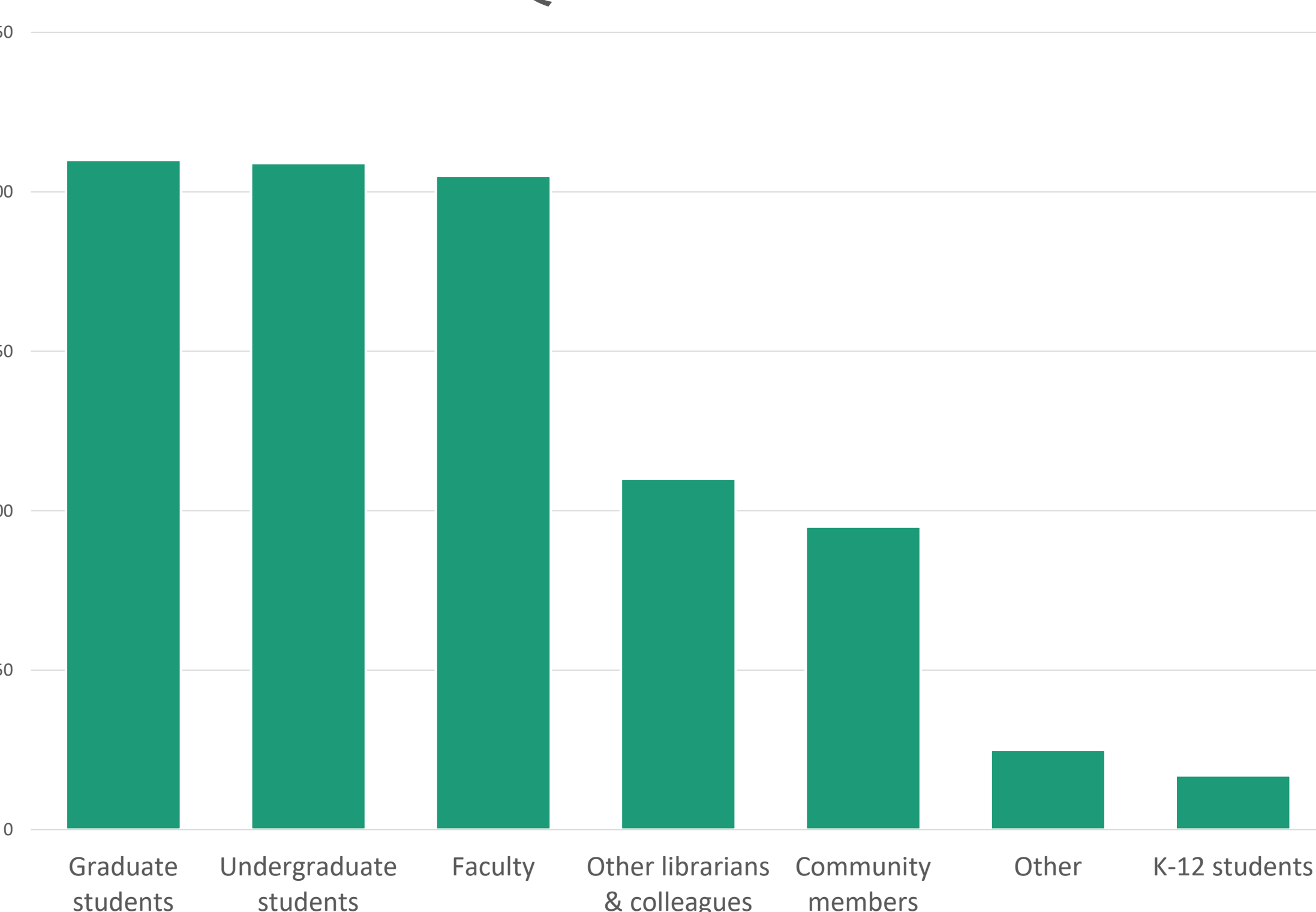
“As a first pass, I always search for **government sources**. The government is an amazingly prolific publisher!”

Most importantly, 4 people called out **IASSIST** as **a great resource and community for answering data questions!**

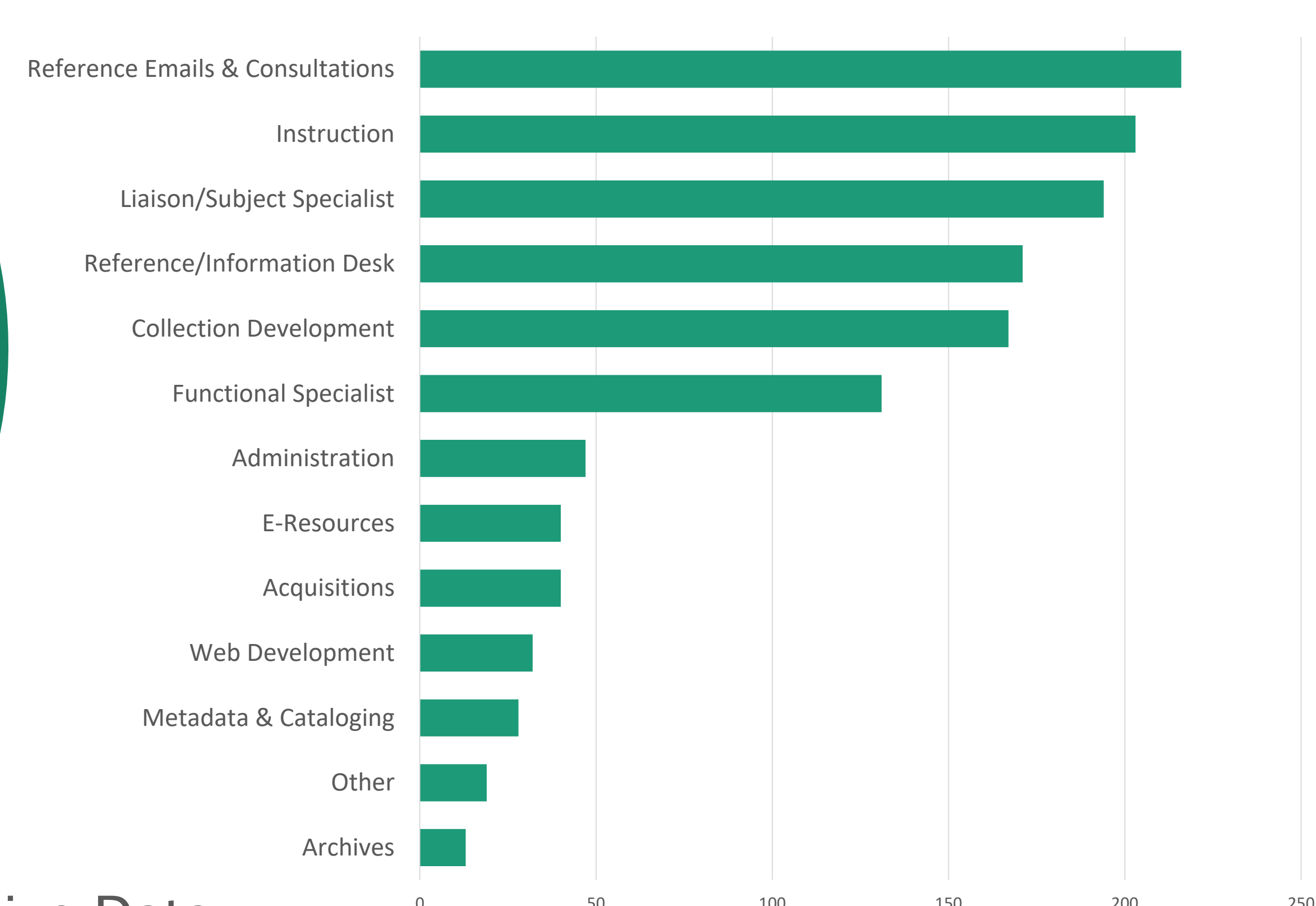
Descriptive Statistics



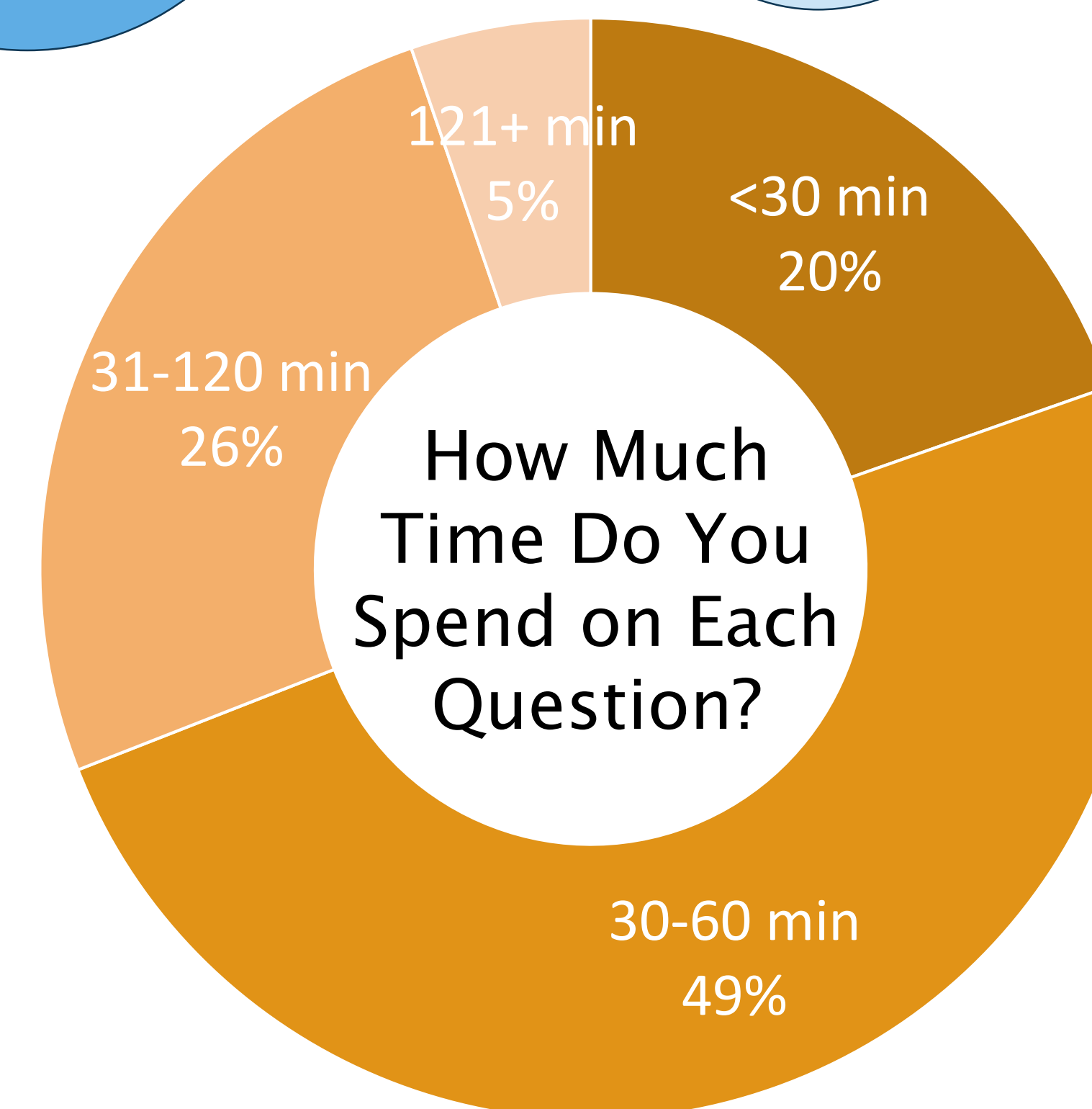
From Whom Do You Receive Data Questions?



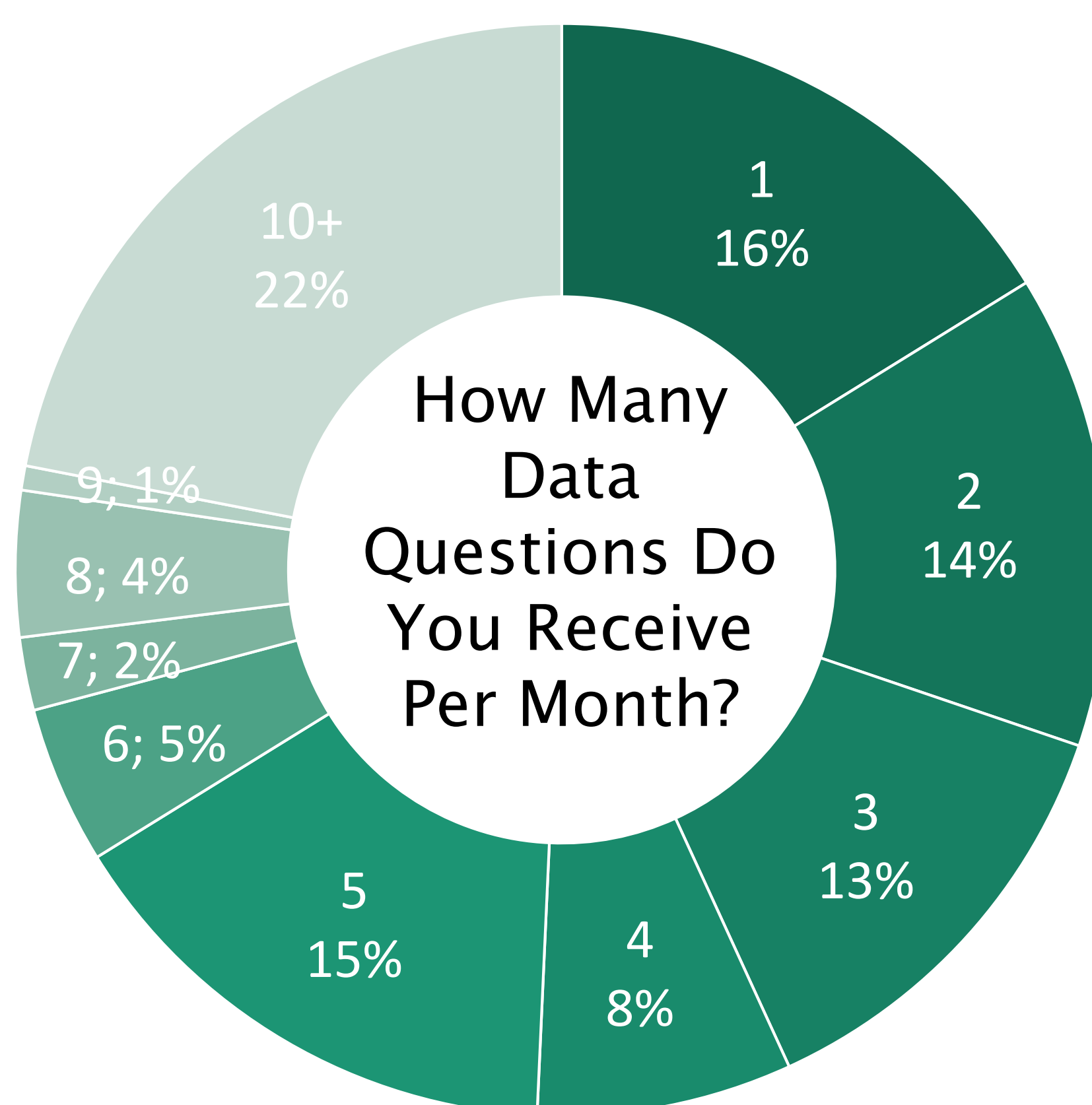
What Types of Duties Do Data Librarians Have?



Time Spent



Average time spent answering each question	% usually or always able to find the data
<30 Minutes	86.5
30-60 Minutes	89.1
61-120 Minutes	81.5
121+ Minutes	61.5
People who spend 30-60 min are more likely to be successful (Chi-Sq.=8.083, df=1, p=0.044)	



Conclusions & Next Steps

Data librarians continue to play vital roles in the research lifecycle and utilize specific subject and resource expertise to locate secondary data and statistics for patrons. This is a specialized skillset that is honed with experience answering questions and time spent in the field, even though data librarians are also taking on many other roles in their institutions. Our research is in the exploratory analysis stage and further work with this dataset is necessary to reveal deeper conclusions and trends.

References

- Kellam, L. M., & Thompson, K. (Eds.) (2016). *Databrarianship: The academic data librarian in theory and practice*. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries.
- Rice, R. & Southall, J. (2016). *The data librarian's handbook*. London: Facet Publishing.